

The Fate of Arthur Ransome's Boat, *Nancy Blackett*.

By Mike Rines.



In 1988 I bought the sunken wreck of Arthur Ransome's favourite boat *Nancy Blackett*. It took nearly three years to restore and cost me £40,000 -- and to this day I cannot explain why I did it.

I already owned the perfect modern cruising boat, a Prout Quest catamaran *Moonshine*. What's more, I knew from experience that owning a wooden boat even in good condition is a first class way of ensuring you spend more time working on the boat than you ever do sailing. But *Nancy* was certainly not in good condition. She was in reality a write off.

I was no Ransome fan and had read none of his books, so I was the least likely person to rescue the boat. What is also pretty unlikely is that I should be here today talking about an 80-year-old wooden boat that belonged to the long dead writer of children's books.

So why am I talking to you about Arthur Ransome's old boat?

First, because Arthur Ransome is still a figure of enormous interest, and even mystery and controversy. A new biography was published not very long ago.

Second, all his Swallows and Amazons children's books are still in print, still stocked in our bookshops and still very popular. A new Swallows and Amazons film has recently hit our cinema screens to critical acclaim.

Third, all the books feature sailing, and continue to inspire generations of young sailors, including round-the-world sailor Ellen MacArthur, who is today the patron of The NB Trust.

But there is a lot more to Ransome than Swallows and Amazons. On a visit to Russia he got caught up in the Revolution. He became Russian correspondent for the Daily News and later for The Manchester Guardian, the only journalist presenting a fair view of the revolutionaries.

He played chess with Lenin. He was a friend of Trotsky and married his secretary. He negotiated a peace treaty between the revolutionary government and Estonia. He became an agent for the British government and also for the Revolutionary government - in other words, he was a double agent. Other notable novelists who have worked for MI6 were Somerset Maugham, Graham Greene and Compton Mackenzie, but Ransome was the only novelist double agent.

Later, he was the Manchester Guardian's China correspondent, and then for many years its fishing correspondent.

However, Ransome's greatest passion was sailing. He owned a succession of yachts, but he said *Nancy Blackett*, named after the leader of the Amazons, was the nicest little boat he ever owned. In WDMTGs, which some regard as his best book, she featured as Goblin. We know this from his illustrations in the book. We used this drawing of Goblin from the book when we restored *Nancy's* interior.

There's another reason why we here should be interested in Ransome and his boats. Although mention of Swallows and Amazons conjures up images of the Lake District, just as many of his books were set in East Anglia. WDMTGs starts at Pin Mill on the Orwell in Harwich Harbour, and Secret Water is set in Walton Backwaters.

WDMTGs is the story of how the Swallows children were left alone on Goblin when the skipper went ashore in Felixstowe to get a can of petrol. The anchor dragged and the wind and tide took the boat out to sea. Because the wind was blowing from the west, they had no option but to sail across the North Sea.

There were many weird coincidences connected with my rescue and restoration of *Nancy Blackett* from decay in Scarborough harbour.

Here's how the story started.

I was brought up in Scarborough, where my parents lived all their lives. In later life, whenever I visited them, I used to go down to the harbour to look at whatever boats were in. On one occasion, I saw a lovely old wooden boat, in immaculate condition, with perfect paintwork and gleaming brass port lights.

I was working in London at the time as a magazine editor, and when I got back to my office, I told my secretary about this lovely boat because I knew she was a keen sailor.

I didn't tell her what the boat's name was because I had forgotten it. Not having read the S & A books, it meant nothing to me. I didn't know *Nancy Blackett* was the tomboy leader of the Amazons in Ransome's books. However, my secretary said that her father had once owned a boat similar to the one I had described. She said its name was *Nancy Blackett*. That jogged my memory, and I said, 'But that's the name of the boat I'm telling you about!' She then told me that Arthur Ransome had owned it, so I made a point of looking out for *Nancy* whenever I was in Scarborough. Sadly, her owner neglected her over the years. I photographed shows her lying against the rough stone outer harbour wall without fenders so her planks had been seriously damaged. She filled with water when the tide came in and emptied when it went out. Several ropes were holding her more or less upright against the wall. At some point someone loosed them off and she fell over, cracking several frames and lots of ribs. A huge wave bursting over the harbour wall and guess where *Nancy* was. Worse still, one such wave washed a car

off the wall, and it landed on her. Both her main hatch and forehatch were missing and the cockpit floor had gone. She was wrecked inside and out.

On a later visit, I found her in an even more pitiable state lying on her side in the mud in the middle of the harbour. She was, in truth a write off. After lengthy negotiations, I persuaded her owner to sell her. Even though he was not prepared to look after her, he was reluctant to sell *Nancy* – I suspect it was something to do with the fact that when you sell your last boat it is said it means you are ready to die.

I was living at the time in Nacton on the bank of the Orwell and I had *Nancy* brought down to Fox's yard at the head of the river. I found *Nancy* was in an even worse condition than I had thought. Her interior needed a complete rebuild and both mast and bowsprit were cracked. Much of her inside furniture was a heap of junk.

I needed to find someone to restore her. I mentioned it to one of the postmen who, in those days collected the mail from our house, because we ran a business from home. By coincidence, he had a neighbour who he thought would be interested. That's how traditional shipwright Stan Ball, a Dunkirk veteran, came to work on the boat for two years. Then, when he emigrated to New Zealand to join his daughter. I found a replacement, again by coincidence.

A storm had washed up a wooden boat on Nacton Shore, and my son had made her safe by tying her to a tree and reporting the fact to the harbourmaster at Pin Mill. Her grateful young owner came to thank us. He explained that he was training as a naval architect and had just finished restoring the rescued boat. "How would you like to tackle another?" I asked. And that's how James Pratt came to finish *Nancy's* restoration.

Once I had bought the boat, I decided I really ought to read the Swallows and Amazons series. Having done that, I thought I should tackle Ransome's biography. I was sitting in my study facing across the valley to Levington when I was surprised to read that in 1932 Ransome moved to Broke Farmhouse in the village. I had only to raise my eyes to see that very building.

I read other books about Ransome. One day I was on the phone to Roger Wardale, the author of Arthur Ransome's *East Anglia*, when my wife called from the kitchen: "Mike, can you help? There's a bird trapped in here." It was a swallow, of course.

Another coincidence arose when I took a young Ransome fan and her mother to visit Walton Backwaters, the location of Ransome's *Secret Water*. The owner of Horsea Island there was Mrs Backhouse. She could remember Ransome camping there in the early 1930s. She invited us to visit her at her farmhouse, (the *Native Kraal* in the book). On the way there a seal popped up out of the water in exactly the place one did in the book.

We knocked on the open doors of the farmhouse, front and back, but in spite of frenzied dog barking nobody came. We decided to walk in and, as we did so, a swallow flew out

over our heads. Then Mrs Backhouse appeared and invited us into the kitchen where we were astonished to find there were five swallows' nests. "I do try to keep them out of the best bedroom," said Mrs Backhouse.

The biggest coincidence of all was that, though I was not a Ransome fan, I was nevertheless probably the only person in a position to rescue her. First, I knew she was there in Scarborough and in need of rescue. Also, I had good connections with Scarborough Marine, the only boatyard in the town, and was able to arrange the first stage of the rescue with them.



I also had good relations with the manager of Fox's Marina at the head of the Orwell. He let *Nancy* lie there ashore for more than two years without charge and gave me a substantial discount on all the materials I needed from the chandlery.

Again, because I was a public relations consultant, I knew how to get publicity for what I was doing, and got big stories placed not only in all the leading newspapers, the Guardian, Telegraph and the Times but also on radio and TV. On one occasion we had camera crews from both BBC and ITV filming on board while we sailed. One crew had to hide in the saloon while the other interviewed me in the cockpit.

The publicity enabled me to win important support from companies like International Paints (the specialist boat paint supplier), Black & Decker (for tools), Thornycroft (for a new engine) and various electronics firms for navigational equipment. Without the help provided by these companies I could not have afforded the restoration.

The weird coincidences go on and on. I play the violin with various friends. One day I discovered that a lady I played with was a Ransome fan, so I lent her some of my Ransome books, including Roger Wardale's *Arthur Ransome's East Anglia*. Shortly afterwards, I got an email from her, saying: "Spooky or what, the photograph on page 57 of four people looking out over Harwich Harbour is of me with my mother, brother and sister!"

Weirder still: I told the story of this coincidence to Marion Wells, the Woodbridge Town Centre Coordinator and member of the Maritime Woodbridge working party. She later produced a woodcut that her mother had made when she was a child, showing her and her brother in exactly the same place in the same pose.

Even more weird, Rollo Cooper, another member of our working party, owned the former Harwich harbour Ferry, *Brightlingsea*, and recognised that the rail the children are leaning against in both the photograph and the woodcut is the stern rail of the *Brightlingsea*.

Nancy is now owned by the Nancy Blackett Trust, which ensures that this much-loved boat will always be looked after. She is listed in the top ten classic boats in the UK. Her restoration led directly to the foundation of the Arthur Ransome Society, which has branches all over the UK and in the US, Canada, Australia and Japan.

I enjoyed the challenge of restoring the boat to exactly how she was when Ransome owned her. I did some of the work myself, in particular searching for bits and pieces of equipment that were missing – an old compass, a paraffin burning stove, an enamel sink, old brass handles for the engine controls, a traditional trailing log. I also had to find experts to restore the brass clock, the barometer and to repair the loo.

I still don't know why I took on the project. I must have been fated to do it. It has been a very rewarding experience. I'll never forget the number of people who have come on board with tears in their eyes and said S&A.....

In the course of the project, I have had a lot of help. I've met a lot of very fine people and I've enjoyed many splendid occasions.

If you join the NBT you can sail in *Nancy*. Here is *Nancy* in her restored pomp, and ready to inspire a new generation of would-be swallows.

